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WHERE IS THE WAR? EXPLAINING PEACE IN SIERRA LEONE

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ABSTRACT The Sierra Leone civil war of 1991-2002 has widely been regarded as stemming from the desperate political and socio-economic conditions that affected the country's youth. Following the end to hostilities, there has been great concern to address youth grievances as a means of consolidating peace and stability. There have been frequent warnings in UN, NGO and academic reports of the dangers of limited progress in this regard, and it has been suggested that persistent pre-war conditions are undermining ex-combatants' investment in peace and increasing risks of a return to conflict. Nevertheless, since the end of conflict Sierra Leone has experienced relatively low levels of violence. Despite fears, national elections in 2012 were remarkably peaceful. This article seeks to make sense of this seemingly propitious outcome, given the many warnings over ex-combatant and youth grievances. Informed by interviews conducted with ex-combatants between 2008-12, this examination shows that the links between youth grievances and the onset of conflict have often been misrepresented and that key differences between pre-war and post-war conditions in Sierra Leone have been neglected. Nevertheless, whilst risk of renewed war in the near future may be limited, economic and political conditions reconnect ex-combatants with violence in the context of 'peacetime.'

Introduction

This article is the third in a series examining the political integration of Sierra Leone's former combatants.¹ Previous papers have considered the extent to which ex-combatants can be said to have been successfully demobilised and politically

¹ See K. Mitton, 'Engaging disengagement: The political reintegration of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 8/2 (June 2008), 193 — 222, and K. Mitton, 'Rearmament, Remobilisation and Disintegration in Sierra Leone', unpublished paper for the 'Disarming, Demobilising and Reintegrating Armed Groups after Conflict' project at the Conflict, Security & Development Research Group, King's College London, (2009).

reintegrated, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of international peace-building efforts and the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme. An important finding was that many of the same political, economic and social conditions that had rendered youths vulnerable to mobilisation during the war continued to affect them in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Factors such as high unemployment were shown to undermine the reintegration of ex-combatants, and consequently Sierra Leone's long-term stability was judged to ultimately depend on its ability to provide basic welfare and economic opportunities to youth. Drawing on interviews and research with ex-combatants between 2008-12, this article seeks to answer an important question raised by this latter point.² If the economic and political conditions that were once instrumental in driving youths to violence remain, what conditions have served to restrain the remobilisation of ex-combatants? Put another way, how do we explain post-conflict peace?

Youths, Grievances and Warnings of War

In many respects, understanding peace in Sierra Leone requires an understanding of the earlier conflict. Those warning of a return to violence have given particular attention to the links between youth grievances and the onset of war in 1991. Paul Richards and Krijn Peters have offered convincing accounts of the economic and political marginalisation facing Sierra Leone's youth in the years preceding conflict.³ In the harsh economic conditions of the late 1980s, a generation of young rural –based Sierra Leoneans experienced the brunt of a decline in public spending and 'a crisis of the patrimonial state'.⁴ Increasingly unable to access education, secure employment, finance marriage or make a home, many blamed chiefs and elders for monopolising limited resources and blocking social mobility. As resources became scarce, 'big men' and patrons increasingly bypassed traditional obligation to disburse wealth and opportunities to local support bases, securing their monopoly on power through

² Over 90 unstructured interviews were conducted with ex-combatants of all factions and ranks between September 2008 and April 2012, for an approximate total period of fourteen months. Fieldwork was carried out across Sierra Leone, focussing particularly on Bo, Freetown, Kailahun, Kenema, and Makeni.

³ See for example Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), and Krijn Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005).

⁴ *Ibid*

collaboration with the one-party state of the All People's Congress (APC). Political dissent was often violently suppressed by the kleptocratic APC government of President Joseph Momoh. Youths looked on helplessly as the ruling cabal lined their pockets with the profits of mineral resources, whilst the wider country slid further into poverty.

When the RUF invaded eastern Sierra Leone in 1991, leader Foday Sankoh described the insurgency as a movement to overthrow the corrupt elites who had marginalised the country's poor. This rhetoric resonated with frustrated rural youths. The rebels offered an opportunity to reverse power relationships and access resources. A former RUF volunteer recounted:

They [political leaders] came and destroyed the youths that were coming up, so we found it difficult. When the revolution came, I welcomed it because of the ideology. I knew that if I was able to fight and free my land from this handful of greedy leaders, I will one day be able to prepare myself and my children for a better future.⁵

According to this 'crisis of youth' reading of the civil war, the RUF invasion lit the torch paper of young people's grievances, tapping into a reservoir of anger and frustration which expressed itself in acts of revenge against ruling elites and the seizure of the country's resources.

If youths were deemed critical to the onset and conduct of civil war, then youths have been deemed equally critical to post-conflict peace and stability. As Richard Fanthorpe and Roy Maconachie have noted, the 'crisis of youth' explanation of Sierra Leone's civil war has become in many respects the 'master narrative of post-war reconstruction' in the country.⁶ Boersch-Supan has similarly observed that the international aid community has made youth empowerment a 'focal point' of its reconstruction and development efforts.⁷ This has led to an interesting trend in the

⁵ Interview, Freetown, 10 January 2009.

⁶ R. Fanthorpe and R. Maconachie, 'Beyond The 'Crisis of Youth'? Mining, Farming, and Civil Society in Post-War Sierra Leone,' *African Affairs*, 109/435 (February 2010), 251-272, p.256.

⁷ Boersch-Supan, 'The generational contract in flux: intergenerational tensions in post-conflict Sierra Leone' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 50/1 (2013) 25-51, p.25.

analysis of post-conflict stability in Sierra Leone. The relative health of the country's security has at times been judged not so much on the persistence or prevention of armed violence but rather on the extent to which youths, and in particular ex-combatants, value peace above the resumption of war. The post-conflict master narrative of security has been dominated by the idea that if placed in conditions similar to those of pre-war Sierra Leone, youths will once again drag the country into civil war. This idea has featured heavily in reporting on youth unemployment and the failure of the DDR programme to provide long-term solutions to the economic challenges facing ex-combatants. In 2001, the International Crisis Group (ICG) warned of a 'crisis of expectations' as ex-combatants realised that Sierra Leone was 'more destitute and lacking in opportunity than before they went to war.'⁸ It described ex-combatants as 'a volatile mass of men whose expectations have been greatly disappointed.' In 2003, the ICG described youths as 'a large, disgruntled population with time on its hands and the capacity to do both great good and harm', with high unemployment 'one of the biggest threats to stability.'⁹ That same year, a study for the Institute of Security Studies warned of the 'potential threat' of unemployed and disgruntled ex-combatants 'drifting into criminality or even renewed conflict.'¹⁰ Another study by the Conflict Security and Development Group warned that 'the lack of opportunity that drove young people into the ranks of the RUF is likely to persist', presenting a risk that resultant frustration 'boils over once again'.¹¹

Warnings over the destructive potential of ex-combatants and youth in Sierra Leone were not just a theme of the years immediately following an end to conflict in 2002. In 2005, Joseph Hanlon described growing concern over 'the return of the very problem that started this brutal war [...] - unemployed and poorly educated youth with no jobs and no future.'¹² In 2006, Sierra Leone's Vice-President Solomon Berewa told the Peace Building Commission that youth unemployment and

⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Sierra Leone: Managing Uncertainty*, (Freetown/Brussels: 2001) p.14

⁹ ICG, *Sierra Leone: The State of Security and Governance*, (Freetown/Brussels: 2003) p.23, 28.

¹⁰ M. Malan, S. Meek, T. Thusi, J. Ginifer and P. Coker, 'Sierra Leone: Building the Road to Recovery,' *Institute of Security Studies*, Monograph 80 (March 2003): 2003, p.2.

¹¹ Conflict, Security and Development Group, *A Review of Peace Operations: A Case for Change* (London: 2003), cited in Joseph Hanlon, 'Is the international community helping to recreate the preconditions for war in Sierra Leone?', *The Round Table* 94/381 (2005) 459 — 472, p.470.

¹² Joseph Hanlon, (2005) 'Is the international community helping to recreate the preconditions for war in Sierra Leone?' *The Round Table*, 94: 381, 466.

marginalization remained the ‘most immediate threat to the country’s fragile stability.’¹³ The Peace Building Commission itself noted that ‘many of the dire conditions that gave rise to the conflict in 1991 remain in 2006, with many youths unemployed, marginalized and lacking hope for the future.’¹⁴ In 2008, the ICG reported that ‘an ever-growing army of unemployed, socially alienated youth is a perennial threat to security.’¹⁵ The UN Secretary-General’s reports consistently described high levels of youth unemployment as one of ‘the most serious threats to the tenuous stability of the country,’¹⁶ warning in 2011 that ‘unacceptably high levels of youth unemployment persist and remain a threat to peace consolidation.’¹⁷ Roy Maconachie and Gavin Hilson’s 2011 study of artisanal gold mining in rural Sierra Leone observed the ever-present ‘concern that this “crisis of youth” could lead to renewed conflict in the near future.’¹⁸

Despite these regular warnings, post-conflict Sierra Leone has not been marked by militancy from an ‘ever-growing army’ of socially alienated youth and ex-combatants. Indeed, far from it. Sierra Leone has remained remarkably stable since 2002; despite incidents of election violence in 2007, there has been no major outbreak of conflict in the country. Elections in 2012 were the most peaceful of the post-war era. The frustration and despair felt by ex-combatants has yet to ‘boil over’, and crime levels in the country remain at worst on par with regional neighbours that have not suffered from a recent and vicious conflict.

Why then, is this the case? Are the warnings of the destructive potential of ex-combatants misplaced, or is it only a matter of time before Sierra Leone witnesses a violent boiling-over of frustrations?

¹³ United Nations (UN) *Third Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone*, UN Doc. S/2006/922 (New York: UN 2006) p.1.

¹⁴ UN, *Report of the Peacebuilding Commission, General Assembly, Sixty-first Session*, UN Doc. A/61/901-S/2007/269 (New York: UN 2007) Agenda item 26, p.5.

¹⁵ ICG, *Sierra Leone: A New Era of Reform?* (Dakar/Brussels: 2008) p.i

¹⁶ UN, *Report of the Peacebuilding Commission*, p.3

¹⁷ UN, *Seventh report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone*, UN Doc. S/2011/554 (New York: UN 2011) p.6

¹⁸ R. Maconachie and G. Hilson, ‘Artisanal Gold Mining: A New Frontier in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone?’, *Journal of Development Studies*, 47/4, (April 2011) 595-616. Their study, published in 2011 but submitted in 2009, notes that joblessness is ‘rife’ among the 34 per cent of the population aged between 15-35 years, particularly in rural areas.

Where is the War? Explaining the Peace

Disillusionment with the slow pace of development among Sierra Leone's former fighters and unemployed youths is real, and such discontent may very well lead some to take desperate measures, including turning to violence to register grievances or to make a better living. However, the nature of this risk is often misrepresented, a tendency that can be linked to two trends in analysis. First, the logic linking youth's frustrations to renewed conflict is often predicated upon misleadingly simplistic readings of the causes of the civil war. Second, amidst a much-needed focus on the persistence of problems affecting youth, crucial differences between pre-war and post-war conditions in Sierra Leone are often overlooked. When both these factors are taken into account, it becomes clear that the risk of a return to war has been exaggerated. Nevertheless, as shall be discussed, youths and ex-combatants remain vulnerable to recruitment to other forms of violence.

Narratives of War and Peace

One persistent view of Sierra Leone's (in)security follows a neo-Malthusian logic and bares a strong resemblance to what Richards described as the 'New Barbarism' explanation of conflict.¹⁹ Through this lens, war in Sierra Leone was viewed as an inevitable outcome of socio-political collapse caused by economic and ecological pressures and the removal of Cold-War restraints. This collapse was said to have unleashed a violent competition for limited resources in which youths, as 'loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid', were agents of anarchic banditry and lawlessness.²⁰ Whilst few would now subscribe to the New Barbarism thesis as an explanation of the civil war, its spirit is very much alive in the language employed by post-conflict reports warning of the potential 'explosion' of violence and 'overflow' of simmering tensions among a restless mass of former fighters and youths.²¹ Implicit in these descriptions is the idea that large numbers of unemployed youths are likely to resort to violence and criminality to seize inaccessible resources. The sheer number of

¹⁹ Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest*, p.xiii

²⁰ R. Kaplan 'The Coming Anarchy,' *The Atlantic Monthly*, 273/2 (1994), 44-76, p.60.

²¹ In March 2011, the head of the UN in Sierra Leone warned that 'hikes in oil and rice prices, inability to pay salaries on time, unfinished public work programmes and insufficient rains combined with a population of unemployed and disillusioned youth could explode beyond control.'
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10208.doc.htm>

unemployed youths often appears to be the prime reason for concern, and there has been a marked tendency to describe a demographic ‘youth bulge’ in West Africa as a security threat on this mark alone.²² In Sierra Leone, fears that the disgruntlement of youths will again boil over into violence and lawlessness have at their root a conviction that the devil makes work for idle hands, and that ex-combatant hands are particularly accustomed to diabolical acts.

An immediate problem with this analysis is that the 1991-2002 war cannot be adequately explained as a spontaneous overflowing or eruption of youth’s anger and frustration. Conflict arrived in eastern Sierra Leone with an invasion by a small number of veteran combatants, many of Liberian origin and with a specific Liberian-backed agenda to unseat the government of Joseph Momoh.²³ Whilst various grievances may well have primed youths for recruitment by the RUF, the role of commanders and power-brokers was fundamental to the outbreak of violence. In post-conflict Sierra Leone, the idea that youth’s frustration might ‘again’ organically mature into violence fails to grasp the importance of third-party actors to mobilisation.

Another difficulty rests in the implicit notion that ex-combatants are especially prone to violence. Whilst this may be the case for some former fighters, it is certainly not the case for all. Many ex-combatants exercised little choice in originally taking up arms, and their transformation into ruthless fighters was the result of systematic brutalisation and conditioning rather than an innate lust for loot and power.²⁴ Demobilisation, often outside of the formal DDR programme, was an opportunity for such combatants to escape this environment of brutality. In post-conflict Sierra Leone, these same combatants are often as reluctant to engage in violence as they were prior to conscription, regardless of their poverty, and it would again take nothing less than

²² A 2005 United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) report characterised high youth unemployment as a ‘ticking time bomb for the region.’ UNOWA, *Youth Unemployment and Regional Insecurity in West Africa* (UNOWA December 2005), p.5. For a critique of the ‘youth bulge’ argument, see Jo Boyden, (2007) ‘Children, War and world disorder in the 21st century: a review of the theories and the literature on children’s contribution to armed conflict’, *Conflict, Security and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2007.

²³ Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest*, p.5, estimates the initial invasion force as 100-strong. Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, p.1., places the number between 100 and 300.

²⁴ See for example R. Maclure and M. Denov, “‘I Didn’t Want to Die so I Joined Them’: Structuration and the Process of Becoming Boy Soldiers in Sierra Leone’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18 (2006) 119-135.

an order at gun-point for them to return to conflict. Other ex-combatants, including those who openly expressed a desire to return to fighting following their initial demobilisation, have undergone a difficult process of adjustment following their eventual acceptance that the conflict was truly over.²⁵ For those seeking to return home to families and communities, their violent behaviour immediately following conflict was a major hindrance to reconciliation and reintegration, and adjustment became essential to survival in the new world of peace. By 2012, many of the ex-combatants interviewed by this author had made significant progress in this regard and were staunchly opposed to renewed conflict.²⁶ The assumption that former fighters are more prone to violence, though understandable, is simplistic, not least because for many the reverse is true.

A second major trend in security analysis stems from a reading of the civil war that portrays young combatants as driven by self-interest and seduced by the economic opportunities of war.²⁷ An influential incarnation of this idea was the ‘resource war’ argument, which in application to Sierra Leone, focussed upon the RUF’s mining of diamonds and widespread looting. War, as a profitable enterprise, was said to have become an end in itself.²⁸ Rather than anarchic mob violence driven by scarcity and social collapse, conflict was supposedly a rational investment by combatants. In post-conflict security analysis, this argument has explained the demobilisation and disarmament of combatants as the result of a similar cost-benefit calculation, in which peace was deemed to hold greater prospects than war. Crucial to this equation were incentives offered by the government and its development partners, including promises of skills training, education and employment. In 2001, the ICG reported that ‘the rank and file combatant has effectively been promised an alternative livelihood in return for embracing peace. Conflict is traded for development.’²⁹ The resulting security argument has been that if promised alternative livelihoods fail to materialise, ex-combatants may ultimately reconsider this trade-off and again take up arms.

²⁵ This factor came across strongly in interviews with the youngest of former RUF recruits.

²⁶ Interviews with ex-RUF, Freetown and Kenema, April 2012.

²⁷ For discussion of the various political and economic incarnations of this approach, see Mats Berdal and David Malone, *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers 2000).

²⁸ See Paul Collier, ‘Doing Well Out of War’ in Berdal & Malone, *Greed and Grievance*, and Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, *Justice-Seeking and Loot-Seeking in Civil War* (World Bank, February 1999).

²⁹ ICG, *Sierra Leone: Managing Uncertainty*, p.14.

Such analysis again exaggerates the extent to which individual combatants exercised autonomous choices regarding their mobilisation and demobilisation. Though the various economic, social and political functions of conflict and peace are important to understanding many combatants' behaviour, exclusively interpreting decisions to fight or disarm through recourse to incentives and disincentives fails to capture the reality of those youths whose recruitment and demobilisation was largely out of their control.³⁰ When applied to those who did make decisions based on perceived self-interest, this analysis remains flawed in its assumption that conflict is still viewed as a viable or attractive alternative to a difficult peace. This stands in contradiction to the experience of many former fighters, who received little if any economic or political gains from their experience of war. Whilst some enjoyed the short-term benefits of looting, diamond mining, and exercising power over civilians, by the end of conflict, most had little to show for it.³¹ Loot and resources of significant value travelled upwards to commanders who, during DDR, often seized the benefits intended for those under their command.³² Promises of free education and a new, more equitable RUF government were never realised; many ex-combatants who claimed to have joined the rebels in sympathy with their political aims became disillusioned with the group. Their view of what war can deliver is thus far from positive. A statement by the previously cited former volunteer is indicative: 'I wasted my life. In that war, when it was over, what do I have to show for it? We came out with nothing. I wasted so many years.'³³

The idea that peace must compete with war as a profitable investment, or offer ex-combatants an alternative livelihood, is not only an overstatement of the benefits of conflict but also an understatement of its costs. The miserable conditions experienced by combatants towards the end of war was often far more instrumental in encouraging

³⁰ Local negotiations over disarmament were generally handled by commanders, who in many instances exploited their position to keep the financial rewards for handing in weapons intended for those under their command.

³¹ Interviews with ex-combatants in 2008-2012 suggested the benefits reaped by most rank-and-file during war related to drugs, low-value looted goods and sex. Commanders were said to have taken the lion's share of profit from diamonds and looted goods.

³² See Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, *What the Fighters Say: A Survey of Ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone June-August 2003, Interim Report July 2004* (New York: Columbia University Press 2004) p.27.

³³ Interview, Freetown, 10 January 2009.

them to seek peace than promises of employment and education. These conditions included the decisive in-roads that the Guinean military and the Civil Defence Forces were making into RUF territory, and the arrival of British troops in Freetown in 2000. Military reversals brought desperate conditions for RUF combatants, many of whom were increasingly tired of combat and the rigours of bush-life and sought to return to the villages, homes and families from which they had been abducted.³⁴

Demobilisation was not solely a trading of conflict for development, therefore, but quite simply for some a trading of conflict for peace. Understood in this light, we may better understand why persistent challenges of poverty and marginalisation have not prompted ex-combatants to return to arms.

A Return to the Past?

Analysis of stability in Sierra Leone has not only tended to rely on simplistic notions linking youth grievances and conflict; it has also frequently reinforced a misleading view that the country has returned to its pre-war condition. There is little doubt that various factors instrumental in nurturing conflict remain. Unemployment among a large population of youths is high, corruption is pervasive, and there is considerable frustration over the economic and political dominance of traditional elites.³⁵ If these issues are not addressed, it has been warned, they may again lead Sierra Leone to war.³⁶ However, such warnings neglect crucial differences between pre-war and post-war Sierra Leone. These differences further help to explain why, despite the many challenges faced by youths and ex-combatants, mass violence has not returned to the country.

³⁴ Interviews with ex-RUF in Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Freetown, February 2009- April 2010. Keen, *Conflict and Collusion*, p. 259, notes that despite war-weariness, some ex-combatants remained reluctant to disarm.

³⁵ In 2010, the UN Secretary-General noted with concern that 800,000 young people remained 'unemployed, employed without remuneration or underemployed.' UN, *Fifth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone*, UN Doc. S/2010/471 (New York: UN 2010) p.12. For tensions between youths and traditional elites, see Boersch-Supan, 'The generational contract in flux'.

³⁶ See Hanlon, 'Is the international community helping to recreate the preconditions for war in Sierra Leone?'

Sierra Leone's experience of a decade of devastating conflict is in itself one major difference. Bitter memories of a destructive war have left some of the more ideologically dedicated former RUF members firmly persuaded that violence is not a viable tool for lasting change.³⁷ Ex-combatants and non-combatants hold a common conviction that war impeded progress, and that the country must move on from its violent past if solutions to poverty and inequality are to be found. Development is equated with peace.

If this is the case, how do we make sense of ex-combatant statements such as those given to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), that due to the persistence of 'the conditions that caused them to join the conflict,' 'if given the opportunity, they would fight again'?³⁸ There are at least two explanations. First, many such warnings were made in the immediate aftermath of demobilisation, at a time when ex-combatant's attitudes and behaviour were strongly shaped by their years of socialisation into the rebel group. Whilst many were determined to distance themselves from their past, others struggled to adjust and felt a closer affinity to their faction than their families.³⁹ By 2012, following ten years of stability in which to undergo the difficult process of psychological and social adjustment to peace, many former fighters interviewed noted that their attitudes toward conflict had simply changed. With time to reflect on their past, they increasingly blamed their lack of education and employment prospects on the conflict itself. Development, treated as synonymous with peace, was now their hope.

Second, warnings by ex-combatants that they might rearm came at a time when many were confronting the limits of reintegration assistance and the spoils of peace. Considerable frustration abounded over the perceived broken promises of government and its partners. Ex-combatants learned that presenting themselves as potential spoilers of peace brought attention to these grievances and needs. A similar logic may

³⁷ Interviews with ex-RUF, Freetown, January 2009; Kenema, July 2009; Bunumbu, Bomoru, March-April 2010. However, during interviews in April 2012, former senior RUF commanders claimed credit for young people's increased political activity and determination to avoid future conflict. In this sense, they argued, the 'rebel war' brought lasting change.

³⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Accra: GPL Press 2004) Vol. 2, Ch. 1, *Executive Summary*, p.5, item 20.

³⁹ This underlines that attitudes and motives among ex-combatants frequently differ; treating them as a singularly-willed 'volatile mass' is deeply reductive.

be discernible in reports published by development organisations and NGOs; an appeal to address the needs of ex-combatants as a security imperative may have elicited a more urgent donor response than an appeal based on humanitarian grounds. In the years following demobilisation, ex-combatants had little bargaining power, beyond the threat of renewed conflict, to lobby government and its partners to prioritise their welfare needs. Given opportunities to speak to media, ex-combatants may still repeat such warnings, again to keep the political focus on their plight.

Beyond experience of war itself, another important difference in post-conflict Sierra Leone is the replacement of the one-party state with a functioning multi-party democracy. In the immediate pre-war period, the social impact of economic mismanagement by the kleptocratic APC government was severe.⁴⁰ The self-serving mishandling of resources by ruling elites in the face of challenging global economic conditions, and the often violent suppression of political opposition, fomented considerable youth discontent in the 1980s. Defiant student activists called for a full return to pluralist rule, and in some cases, for revolution.⁴¹ It was within this environment that the RUF launched its 1991 invasion, with leader Foday Sankoh vowing to overthrow the APC regime of Joseph Momoh.

In post-war Sierra Leone, the situation is significantly different. Since 2002 there have been democratic elections and a successful transfer of power between the SLPP and APC parties. In 2007 and 2012, many former RUF combatants voted for the APC party.⁴² This change removes a potent factor that was behind the mobilisation of youth by the politically ‘excluded’ vanguards of the 1991 rebel insurgency. An invasion from outside could no longer take the guise of a last-resort expedient in opposition to tyranny, nor draw on deep political discontent to fill the ranks of its leadership and co-opt the country’s youth into war. Remnants of the RUF leadership still argue that the grievances their movement articulated remain unaddressed.⁴³ However, despite the deep unpopularity of the rebels in many quarters of Sierra Leone, the newly

⁴⁰ See A. B. Zack-Williams, ‘Sierra Leone: Crisis and Despair, Review of African Political Economy’, *Democracy and Development*, 49 (1990) 22-33.

⁴¹ Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest*, p.21; Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (Indiana University Press, 2005), pp.44-45.

⁴² Interviews with ex-RUF in Freetown and Kenema, April 2010, April 2012; telephone interviews with RUF combatants, 21 November, 2012.

⁴³ Interviews, Freetown, April 2012.

rejuvenated RUF party (RUF) was able to voice its concerns as it competed alongside the major parties in the 2012 ballot.⁴⁴

Whilst many ex-combatants remain deeply cynical about political leaders and their parties, often viewing their electoral options as a choice between one corrupt elite and another, they have nevertheless found that the power of the vote, rather than the gun, is effective in holding leaders to account. A former fighter explained in 2008: ‘You cannot betray me, and then when the next election comes, you tell me to vote for you. No, I cannot vote for you. I will vote for another person, so I can watch him.’⁴⁵

Though the political system remains troubled by problems of corruption and exclusionary patronage, it is nevertheless far better suited to steering youths away from violence than the pre-war one-party state that stifled dissent. Other avenues of political expression and membership have also grown, through a resurgence of associational life. The considerable post-war presence of development agencies and NGOs has encouraged a proliferation of home-grown youth associations and civil society groups, which have often interacted positively with the democratic process.⁴⁶

When the parties are seen as failing the country’s youth, these groups have acted to hold leaders to account and call on government to deliver on promises.⁴⁷ The political platform given to such groups is in marked contrast to the politically restrictive environment of pre-war Sierra Leone and the days of violent student protests. In this respect, ex-combatants and youths have significantly more political representation and room for expression than two decades ago.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Presidential candidate Eldred Collins featured regularly in radio and television debates during campaigning. The RUF’s revival was an interesting development in 2012, discussed in due course. It remained a fringe party, with some informants suggesting its return was funded by senior APC members. Others claimed that despite its stated ideology, the party acted as a patronage network and vehicle for the personal ambitions of certain leaders. Interviews, Freetown, Bo and Kenema, April 2012.

⁴⁵ Interview, Freetown 13 September 2008.

⁴⁶ There are also negative aspects to the proliferation of youth groups, noted in due course. There is good reason to view some youth groups as consolidating exclusionary patronage networks, rather than challenging them; see Boersch-Supan, ‘The generational contract in flux: intergenerational tensions in post-conflict Sierra Leone’, and Fanthorpe & Monachie, ‘Beyond the ‘Crisis of Youth?’

⁴⁷ A multitude of youth groups and umbrella organisations have lobbied successive post-war governments to improve employment opportunities for youths, establish a promised National Youth Commission, and protect the livelihoods and interests of youths in areas affected by renewed industrial mining.

⁴⁸ That such a change may lie behind reduced risks of conflict accords with Scott Straus’s recent analysis of a decline in mass organised violence in sub-Saharan Africa, where he notes that a rise in multi-party elections has ‘attracted would-be insurgents away from the lure of the bush and toward the

Finally, changes in the regional context are crucial to understanding peace in Sierra Leone. Conflict in neighbouring Liberia throughout most of the 1990s and up until 2003 was a source of mobilisation for Sierra Leonean combatants. The first members of the RUF had trained and fought with Charles Taylor's forces in Liberia, with the initial invasion force in Sierra Leone comprised predominantly of Taylor's fighters.⁴⁹ Regional powers such as Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Nigeria were also involved in fighting, sponsoring various anti-Taylor militias that recruited Sierra Leonean combatants. As conflict ended in Sierra Leone in 2002, war in Liberia provided an on-going source of mobilisation for a willing minority of Sierra Leone's fighters.⁵⁰ For those dissatisfied with the DDR programme, struggling to find employment and unable or unwilling to adjust to civilian life, cash offered by Liberian recruiters and intermediaries proved a sufficient incentive to return to arms.

When the conflict ended in Liberia in 2003, and with many former RUF commanders imprisoned or killed, the opportunity for Sierra Leone's ex-combatants to remobilise was significantly reduced. The consolidation of peace that has followed in Liberia has further reduced opportunities to fight for money.⁵¹ Without these mobilisers and sponsors of conflict, there are quite simply limited opportunities for the mobilisation of Sierra Leone's ex-combatants. This is an important difference to 1991, and one all too often overlooked by those warning of a return to war in Sierra Leone through youth discontent.

political arena.' Scott Straus, 'Wars do End! Changing Patterns of Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa', *African Affairs*, 111/443, 2012, pp.179-201, p.197.

⁴⁹ Interviews with former senior RUF commanders, Freetown, April 2012. See also Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone*.

⁵⁰ See Anders Themnér, *Violence in Post-Conflict Societies: Remarginalization, Remobilizers and Relationships* (New York: Routledge 2011) for a detailed study of this process.

⁵¹ However, intermediaries recruited ex-combatants in Liberia during 2011 to partake in conflict in neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire. See 'Cote d'Ivoire: Rebel Recruitment Ring Busted', *New Democrat*, Monrovia: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201104111852.html>, accessed 12 April, 2011. This underlines the importance of taking a regional approach to DDR.

Youth Violence and Risks to Peace

A better understanding of the relationship between youth and the causes of Sierra Leone's civil war, and an appreciation of the local and regional changes affecting the country since 1991, helps shed light on why, despite regular warnings, Sierra Leone's ex-combatants and youth have not resorted to armed conflict, even when faced with persistent socio-economic hardship. Nevertheless, the purpose here is not to dismiss all warnings of possible links between persistent youth poverty and violence; rather, the intention is to more accurately reflect those links. Although a return to conflict may not be an immediate risk, there are other ways in which ex-combatants and youth can and have been mobilised for violence, within a peacetime context. In his analysis of declining incidents of large-scale war in sub-Saharan Africa, Straus has argued that other forms of violence, such as 'electoral violence and violence over access to critical livelihood resources' are likely to persist.⁵² The following discussion supports this assertion, and in this regard, addressing problems of unemployment and socio-economic marginalisation in Sierra Leone remains critical.

Political Violence

It is perhaps ironic that the democratic political system in Sierra Leone represents the greatest opportunity for peace and stability in the country, and yet the most likely source for the remobilisation of ex-combatants. Post-conflict elections have presented an employment opportunity for some unemployed youths and ex-combatants, as the major parties, political candidates and local 'big men' have recruited them as security staff or, less formally, as supporters.⁵³ The mobilisation of youths for what is often little more than political thuggery is certainly nothing new, but became a worrying feature of otherwise successful elections in 2007. Former fighters and unemployed youth were centrally involved in acts of vandalism on party offices and in running street-battles between rival supporters. The APC and SLPP parties employed a number of former commanders to their security taskforces, which effectively operated as election militias. Following 2007 and the APC election victory, the practice of

⁵² Scott Straus, 'Wars Do End!', p. 200.

⁵³ See Mats Utas and Maya Christensen, 'Mercenaries of Democracy: The 'Politricks' of Remobilized Combatants in the 2007 General Elections, Sierra Leone,' *African Affairs*, 107/429 (2008) 515-539.

recruiting ex-combatants and unemployed youths as muscle continued. In local elections of 2008 and following a by-election in March 2009, fighting between the APC and SLPP occurred across the country.⁵⁴ In the latter case, the security taskforces of both parties were implicated as APC supporters, some allegedly wielding machetes, attacked the SLPP headquarters in Freetown.⁵⁵

Violent confrontations between the main parties continued in the run-up to 2012 elections, with SLPP presidential candidate Julius Maade Bio struck by a rock whilst visiting Bo in September 2011. This incident led to further violent clashes, moving police to impose a ban on political rallies.⁵⁶

Incidents of political violence in Sierra Leone may seem to support the argument that ex-combatants and aggrieved youths more generally present a threat to peace. It is certainly clear that the economic desperation of some make the promises of patronage and material reward sufficient incentive to partake in abuses. Unemployed ex-combatants have been offered informal positions as party security staff and given cash, beer and inexpensive goods in return for carrying out acts of intimidation. If former commanders and rank-and-file have been willing to engage in acts of violence for such relatively small rewards, is it not reasonable to expect they might engage in future conflict for the promise of even greater rewards? Again, it is important to understand that many ex-combatant's experience of conflict, where much was lost but little lasting material benefit gained, diminishes this prospect. Political violence, by contrast, has provided an opportunity to make quick gains with far less risk. And whilst war is seen as having been a violent aberration of normal order, many ex-combatants describe political violence as indicative of a return to 'business as usual.'⁵⁷

⁵⁴ The March 2009 violence caught international media attention. See Reuters, *Police Open Fire During Sierra Leone Political Violence*, Freetown, 16 March 2009: <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE52F0IA20090316>, accessed 4 July, 2013.

⁵⁵ Former commanders were implicated in the incident, including controversial presidential bodyguard, Idrissa 'Leatherboot' Kamara. One former NPRC officer openly revelled in the confrontation, which he understood as being as much a competition between former commanders for reputation and status as a political battle. Interview, Freetown May 2010.

⁵⁶ See Reuters, *Sierra Leone Police Ban Rallies to Curb Violence*, Freetown, 23 September 2011: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/23/ozatp-sierraleone-violence-tv-idAFJOE78M0DC20110923>: accessed 7 July, 2013.

⁵⁷ Interviews with ex-RUF, Freetown, April 2010.

The use of material incentives to recruit ex-combatants to commit political violence points to the mobilising role played by political patrons and former commanders. This in itself exposes the flaws in viewing such violence as the spontaneous outpouring of youth's grievances or the inherently violent tendencies of ex-combatants. In 2006, former RUF and West Side Boys (WSB) commanders were released from prison and immediately courted by the APC and SLPP to join their 'security squads.'⁵⁸ Drawing on their wartime networks, commanders were ideally placed to mobilise former rank-and-file and unemployed youths as agents of political intimidation. This employment was an opportunity to improve their social status, gain access to patronage networks, and demonstrate their worth as guarantors of (or threats to) security. Far from being passive victims of manipulation by political leaders, ex-commanders exploited the bitter rivalry and security fears of the main parties order to secure employment. In Maya Christensen and Mats Utas' study of this development, one former commander explained: 'If they [the politicians] try to avoid us now, they will not have a chance to get power. We are more than them. They have to work with us by force. Whether they like it, or they don't like it. It is by force.'⁵⁹ As they found employment with political patrons, former commanders remained deeply distrustful of their sponsors. In April 2012, one former commander complained that politicians used him for his connections and capacity for violence, with little regard for his welfare. He had crossed over to the APC to punish his previous patrons, the SLPP, for failing to deliver promised rewards for service in 2007.⁶⁰

The violence of Sierra Leone's post-conflict political system demands caution when judging the success of DDR. Whilst numerous factors limit the prospect that former fighters return to conflict, their economic situation means that engaging in political violence represents to some a viable and attractive employment opportunity. There may no longer be regional actors seeking to mobilise ex-combatants for conflict, but local political 'big men' – including former commanders, business leaders, and senior politicians – have taken their place in the context of peace. If ex-combatants are to be considered truly demobilised and reintegrated, the economic and political factors that encourage their involvement in electoral violence must be addressed. On this mark,

⁵⁸ See Utas & Christensen, 'Mercenaries of Democracy.'

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Interview, Freetown, April 2012.

the elections of 2012 may seem encouraging. In the lead-up to the ballot, Sierra Leoneans and international observers expressed concern over the increasingly provocative rhetoric of the parties, and the resurgence of the north-south regional divide. Julius Maade Bio, former NPRC head of state and the presidential candidate of the SLPP party, warned that he expected the elections to be violent.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the vote passed peacefully. Was this outcome a sign of significant progress in transforming Sierra Leone's political system?

A former combatant aligned with the APC attributed the peaceful outcome of 2012 elections to an increasingly tolerant political environment and the determination of all Sierra Leoneans – including those in party militias - to avoid violent confrontations.⁶² Prior to elections a number former commanders, disillusioned with past broken promises of politicians, had indeed expressed their intention to 'stay out of politics'.⁶³ Amongst the smaller group of former combatants surrounding the SLPP, however, a different story was told: the APC possessed greater resources and had been able to secure the support of key former commanders and 'big men'.⁶⁴ Lacking resources, and with organisational coherence undermined by party in-fighting, the SLPP, it was claimed, could not compete. Furthermore, they accused the APC of seeking to provoke junior SLPP members into acts of violence so as to delegitimise the party and paint Bio, a former military commander, as little more than a thug. In short, it had become politically unfeasible to engage in violence.

The various reasons behind the peaceful nature of Sierra Leone's 2012 elections are difficult to ascertain, but public demand for a violence-free vote may well have played a role. Nonetheless, a similar demand existed in 2007, with a very different outcome. During a by-election in 2010, a group of ex-RUF combatants explained that despite their commitment to non-violence, their socio-economic situation made abstaining

⁶¹ Interview, Freetown, 19 April 2012. Bio's concerns had little to do with risks of a boiling-over of youth's grievances. He alleged the APC had 'surreptitiously' armed the police with heavy weapons with the intention of intimidating the opposition. Concerns over the delivery of the weapons led the UN Security Council to seek reassurances from Koroma's government. See VOA, *Sierra Leone Ruling Party Official Defends Arms Import*, 15 April, 2012: <http://www.voanews.com/content/butty-sierra-leone-arms-debate-foe-16april12-147541535/180055.html>, accessed 4 July, 2013.

⁶² Telephone interview, 21 November, 2012.

⁶³ Interviews, Freetown, April 2012.

⁶⁴ Telephone interview with senior former commander and colleagues, 23 November 2012.

from ‘election business’ a luxury they could ill afford.⁶⁵ Following former commanders during the 2012 elections, Maya Christensen observed:

While ex-militias seemed very conscious not to let politicians exploit their services for violent purposes, and therefore sought to distance themselves from political involvement, they simultaneously pointed to the significance of taking part. Politics, they argued, was one of few options available to them to make a future life.⁶⁶

Another possible explanation suggested by fieldwork in 2012 is that the APC had indeed successfully out-manoeuvred and out-mobilised its rival, tying-up the support (or acquiescence) of key ex-commanders and ‘big men’. Former NPRC commander Tom Nyuma, an influential figure in traditionally-SLPP aligned Kailahun, was one such significant convert to the APC. On the streets of central Freetown, former combatants also claimed that trade organisations headed by influential former WSB commanders, who were officially ‘out’ of politics, had received substantial donations from the President.⁶⁷ Key commanders, formerly pro-SLPP, were now backing the APC, the expected winner. Maya Christensen observed the ‘stir’ caused when ‘Bomblast’, a senior former WSB member who mobilised SLPP militia in 2007, ‘was seen cruising around the city in a brand new jeep apparently given to him by Ernest Bai Koroma.’⁶⁸ A possibly connected development was the resurrection of the RUFP, which in 2007 had withdrawn from the vote and called on supporters to side with the APC. Rumours abounded in April 2012 that the party was bankrolled by senior APC figures to act as a proxy.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Interviews, Freetown and Grafton, April 2010

⁶⁶ Maya Christensen, *Shadow Soldiering - Mobilisation, Militarisation and the Politics of Global Security in Sierra Leone*, PhD Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, 2013, p.205.

⁶⁷ Interviews, Freetown, April 2012. Informants reported that President Koroma had made a donation to a trade organisation headed by former commanders, who had neglected to share it with junior colleagues. When junior members discovered the deception, fighting broke out, leading to the temporary closure of the black market area ‘Belgium.’

⁶⁸ Maya Christensen, *Shadow Soldiering*, p.204.

⁶⁹ Interviews, April 2012. RUFP leader Eldred Collins vehemently denied these allegations. However, the new-found source of funding for the formerly impoverished RUFP remained unclear. Collin’s stated focus was defeating the SLPP, rather than the incumbent government. The RUFP claimed to have established support among hundreds of former Civil Defence Forces combatants in Bo, Kenema and Kailahun. Field visits could not confirm this.

Whilst difficult to verify, reports that the APC recruited ex-combatants to its side more successfully may partly explain why elections passed with little incident. Election business, in which former commanders sought to gain by offering their services, may have taken place, but in a political context in which the APC – as expected winner with resources at its disposal - had a relative monopoly on the means of violence and required only their passivity.⁷⁰ If this were the case, then elections in 2017 may well follow a more violent path. With President Koroma unable to stand for re-election, and the SLPP likely to enjoy more organisational coherence, the ballot may be more closely fought. In 2012, the APC victory was such that a second round was not required. This round was the focus of violence in 2007, and would likely present the same challenges in 2017.

Mining and Resources

A second source for the peacetime remobilisation of ex-combatants relates to the extraction of Sierra Leone's natural resources. The mining sector holds potential solutions to youth unemployment in the country, but as with Sierra Leone's political system, it can also act to foment youth violence. Pre-war grievances over the ruling elite's monopoly on mining profits remain relevant, particularly in local communities where international corporations have recently recommenced activities. An increase in capital-intensive mining has brought this industry's environmental and economic impact on local communities to the fore. In 2010, Sierra Leone signed two major deals with international firms for the mining of large iron ore deposits in Marampa and Tonkolili. These agreements were criticised by civil society groups and NGOs for flouting new legislation intended to ensure transparency and the reinvestment of profits into local communities.⁷¹

Tensions between local communities and mining firms may lead to the mobilisation of unemployed youths and ex-combatants. In December 2007, protests in Koidu

⁷⁰ An alternative explanation, suggested by Maya Christensen's research, may be that the absence of a number of key ex-commanders from Sierra Leone in the run-up to the elections – (they had been recruited to work in Iraq) - served to disrupt mobilisation networks. This would suggest removing 'spoilers' from the scene may be a viable method of ensuring peace during elections.

⁷¹ The National Advocacy Coalition on Extractives (NACE), a coalition of NGOs and civil society groups, called for the government to review the agreements with London Mining and African Minerals, claiming the generous tax concessions given to the firms contravened the 2009 Mining Act.

against the environmental impact of blasting by the Koidu Holdings diamond-mining firm saw youth groups clash violently with police. Two youths were killed and the government subsequently suspended mining activities pending an investigation. In August 2010, a protest in Lunsar, Port Loko District, against the activities of London Mining and African Minerals saw the arrest of 11 youths for rioting. The youths barricaded roads and access routes to facilities to protest the perceived failure of these firms to employ local young people. Again, in November 2010, residents of Kemadugu in Tonkolili District demonstrated against African Minerals, claiming the mining firm was encroaching on its land. A group of 'irate youth' reportedly abducted two expatriate workers of the mining firm and torched expensive machinery before police intervened with tear gas.⁷² More recently, in April 2012, workers at an African Minerals mine went on strike in Bumbuna, expressing frustration over wage disparities between local and international staff. Police responded with teargas and live ammunition, leading to the reported death of one protester and half-a-dozen injuries.⁷³ In December 2012, following elections, hundreds of workers at a diamond mine in eastern Koidu went on strike to protest pay and working conditions. The army was deployed and two protesters were killed. Local bike riders, with many former combatants in their number, joined the strike in solidarity.⁷⁴

Such incidents have brought youth groups in mining areas under scrutiny. They have long been viewed by government and development-partners as undermining local police and government authority, and the involvement of ex-combatants has raised particular concern.⁷⁵ In 2003, the ICG noted that concerns over youth groups in the diamond mining area of Kono were 'heightened by the presence of formerly armed elements', warning that 'if left to their own devices', they might 'pose a threat to peace and stability if they become more militant and more radical in pursuing redress

⁷² See 'After diamonds, iron foments Sierra Leone tensions', *The Peninsula*, 8 December 2010: <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/business-views/135050-after-diamonds-iron-foments-sierra-leone-tensions-.html>, and 'African Minerals Vs Kemadugu... Villagers Flee Police Brutality,' *Global Times Online*, November 2010: <http://www.globaltimes-sl.org/news1155.html>

⁷³ See Reuters, *S.Leone police probed on iron-mine strike response*, 4 June 2012: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/04/sierraleone-african-idUSL5E8H4CKM20120604>, accessed on 4 July, 2013.

⁷⁴ See BBC, *Sierra Leone Koidu mine: Foreigners 'holed up' after clashes*, 19 December 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20781940>, accessed on 4 July, 2013.

⁷⁵ For an early example, see UN, *Sixteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone*, UN Doc S/2002/1417 (New York: UN 2002) p.6.

for their grievances.’⁷⁶ Fanthorpe and Monachie remark that an important lesson from the December 2007 Kono incident is that ‘no matter how well-organized social activism may be, young people will still resort to desperate measures if they feel their voice is being ignored.’⁷⁷

Violence stemming from youth protests can be seen as an occasional overflowing of valid frustrations during otherwise encouraging instances of political expression. However, the familiar game of patronage politics also features.⁷⁸ Political figures have sought to capitalise on local youth unemployment in resource-rich localities, promising to improve access to mining jobs and profits in return for support. This electioneering has stirred up youth’s resentment at their perceived exclusion from mining profits, whilst also providing unrealistic expectations of employment in the mining sector. In a study of Kono District, Fanthorpe and Monachie question the extent to which Sierra Leone’s post-conflict democracy has benefited local youth. They cite an example from the 2007 election campaign in which APC politicians allegedly promised Kono youths access to sand tailings on a former mining site rumoured to contain diamonds.⁷⁹ Two months after the APC victory, an SLPP member of parliament made a public radio address in which he asked why the tailings remained untouched. Fanthorpe and Monachie report that ‘a large group of youths’ arrived at the mining site in search of diamonds before being dispersed by the police with teargas. Following the aforementioned Kemadugu incident of 2010, Sierra Leone’s Minister of Mineral Resources, Alpha Kanu, publicly blamed SLPP chairman John Benjamin for the violence, accusing him of inciting unrest by presenting the African Minerals agreement as contrary to local interests.⁸⁰ During the 2012 incident in Bumbuna, opposition press blamed the APC for causing local grievances and using

⁷⁶ ICG, *Sierra Leone: The State of Security and Governance*, p.24

⁷⁷ Fanthorpe & Monachie, ‘Beyond the ‘Crisis of Youth?’’ p.267

⁷⁸ Boersch-Supan has recently observed that ‘Meaningful participation and inclusion of youth is often stifled by chiefs, while many youth organisations are dominated by established elites.’ Boersch-Supan, ‘The Generational Contract’, p.45.

⁷⁹ Fanthorpe & Monachie, ‘Beyond the ‘Crisis of Youth?’’, pp.265-266.

⁸⁰ See ‘EXCLUSIVE : John Benjamin incited riot in Kemadugu,’ *Cocorioko*, 3 December, 2010: <http://www.cocorioko.net/?p=5167>

the police as an instrument of repression, alleging that the ruling party received substantial financial backing from the mining firm.⁸¹

With the continued development and exploration of other resources, including foreign leasing of agricultural land and new off-shore oil finds, further flashpoints between local communities and international firms are likely. Ex-combatants and youths will lie at the heart of these conflicts, both as an aggrieved constituency and as a resource mobilised by political patrons.

Conclusion

The risk that ex-combatants may return to arms in response to the persistence of pre-war conditions has often been exaggerated. Ex-combatants are poorly understood as a mob of angry and violence-prone youth, or as a group that views conflict as providing a viable alternative livelihood. War did not ultimately bring the rank-and-file benefits such as economic wealth and access to free education. Instead, for many the conflict represented a period of exploitation that hindered, rather than advanced, their personal welfare. Regardless of the desperate conditions under which many ex-combatants continue to struggle, their experience of conflict has therefore been one that deters, rather than encourages renewed war. However, whilst their determination to avoid violence should not be underestimated, nor should it be taken for granted. Future generations may be less certain of the costs incurred by a resort to arms to register grievances or access resources. Equally, the relative stability enjoyed by Sierra Leone's neighbours cannot be relied upon indefinitely. Addressing the socio-economic difficulties facing Sierra Leone's youth remains critical. This is most evident with regard to ex-combatant's vulnerability to mobilisation for violence in the context of peacetime, where sources of recruitment are found in the increasingly confrontational arena of electoral politics. Here political patrons have followed wartime actors in seeking to capitalise on high youth unemployment and local grievances over resources, remobilising ex-combatants for the purposes of political violence through the promise and dispensation of patronage.

⁸¹ See for example *The Sierra Leone Telegraph*, 'Opposition Speaks Out on Violence and Police Brutality', 22 April 2012: <http://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/archives/1630>, accessed on 3 May 2012.

Moves to curb the exploitation of youths and ex-combatants by political patrons are an important step in reversing this trend, and the elections of 2012 may be evidence that real change in Sierra Leone's political system is taking hold. However, ex-combatants have not simply been passive victims of exploitation. For as long as other employment opportunities remain scarce, some ex-combatants may seek to exploit political violence as a means to access patronage networks and gain status. Reducing this risk involves creating feasible alternative employment opportunities for former fighters and opening up more inclusive routes of social mobility for youth. This is the elusive peace for which many strive.

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